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An Investigation into the Shift in Lie Acceptability in Children from Grades 3-12

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An Investigation into the Shift in Lie Acceptability in Children from Grades 3-12

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by

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ABSTRACT

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In this study the goal was to determine if there was a shift in the extent to which children's attitudes toward deception change as they age. Participants (N=278) enrolled in grades 3-12 completed a survey assessing their lie acceptability and other factors as potential variables associated with a prodeception attitude. Results indicated that greater lie acceptability was correlated with male children who had self-reported acts of bad behavior. Results also suggest that nontraditional family environments may increase one's perception of the acceptability of lying. These findings provide potential predictors of the acceptability of lying in children and adolescents that offer insight into the development of antisocial attitudes, which may have practical implications regarding the timing of crucial interventions as to prevent the continuance and escalation of such behaviors in the future.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As children mature their views of world and self evolve. They begin to make decisions for themselves as to the acceptability of certain behaviors. Acceptability of any behavior is typically measured based on one's positive or negative feelings towards a particular behavior (Oliveira & Levine, 2008). Deceptive behavior, or lying, is among those that have been studied extensively. A lie is a "consciously false statement intended to deceive" (Ahern, Lyon, & Quas, 2011, p. 61). Deception in general is defined as "a message knowingly transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief of conclusion by the receiver" (Buller & Burgoon, 1996, p. 205). Put simply, lying is a type of deception that can only be delivered through a verbal message and typically requires the communication of information that the sender knows to be false. Most of the research to date has examined the many ways in which we lie and who lies most. These studies look at lying capabilities, both in telling and detecting lies, from times of early childhood, during adolescence, and during adulthood (Ahern et al., 2011).

Purpose and Rationale

Many related studies also examine one's perception of the acceptability of lying in conjunction with other aspects of lying, such as how many lies have been told, motivations for lying, and contexts in which lying most frequently occurs. According to Popliger, Talwar, and Crossman (2011), children and adolescents conclude that lying is generally viewed as an unacceptable behavior. Conversely, adults typically find lying to be a generally acceptable action. It appears that at some point in the course of a lifespan something causes someone to shift perception of deception as a socially acceptable behavior. However, there seems to be a deficit in the literature regarding the point in a person's development from childhood to adolescence to

adulthood when attitudes toward deception shift to become more favorable. While the purpose of this study is not to identify what causes this shift, instead, it is to identify at what point in the lifespan the shift begins to occur.

Defining the shift in one's perception of the acceptability of lying is of great interest in that it impacts the likelihood of engaging in deceptive behaviors. The acceptability of lying was found to be positively correlated with one's likelihood of lying (Oliveira & Levine, 2008). Lying is categorized as an antisocial behavior along with many others such as fighting, disobedience, theft, etc. Those who exhibited antisocial behaviors as youths are more likely to maintain and progress their antisocial behaviors into adulthood (Loeber, 1982; Robins, 1978). Results obtained from the information gathered here will serve as indication of adolescents' moving from an antideceptive to a prodeceptive attitude. Knowing what predicts the development of prodeceptive behaviors may be useful to a wide variety of entities (parents, teachers, law enforcement, psychologists, etc.) in efforts to prevent the progression of such behaviors that have been linked to a future of negative behaviors. Unfortunately, this study cannot address all of the contributors that comprise a person's propensity to adopt a favorable attitude toward lying.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acceptability and Evidence of Lying in Children

Most children are socialized very early to believe that the act of lying in general is an unacceptable behavior and that they should be truthful at all times (Popliger et al., 2011). It has been shown that some children are capable of making false statements as early as 2 years of age, with 3-4 year olds showing the largest increase in their abilities to lie (Ahern et al., 2011; Evans & Lee, 2013). Evans and Lee (2013) write that young children's ability to lie is centered on their executive functioning skills that seem to be apparent between 2-3 years of age. As children move into adolescence and early adulthood (11-19 years old), there is an increased incidence of lying (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004).

Most studies regarding lies in children are dependent on motive. In some instances involving prosocial or altruistic lying, adolescents were more accepting of lying behaviors, compared to lies associated with self-gain, challenge, or revenge (Jensen et al., 2004). During these ages adolescents were found to be more likely to lie to their parents than to their friends (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). When lying to parents, adolescents are more likely to withhold information rather than tell a lie (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). However, it is unclear in either of these studies the extent to which adolescents found the act of deception to be socially acceptable. With adults both men and women admitted to lying, with men telling more lies than women, but with differences in content of the lies told and reasons for lying (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996).

Children's Motivations for Lying

The context and content of lies change as children progress in age, as would be expected, due to changes in what motivates one to lie in the first place. Young children create seemingly innocent lies based on their desires (i.e. winning) rather than beliefs (Ahern et al., 2011). For instance, early on children as young as 2 years of age may tell a self-serving lie in order to obtain a reward, such as a cookie, whereas later, they lie in attempts to conceal misdeeds, both of which are based on their desire to obtain a material object or avoid punishment (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). With age progression children start to exhibit prosocial lying, lies intended to benefit another, but tend to move away from that type of lie as they get older (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Next in the progression of lying behaviors is a primary lie, which consists of deliberately attempting to deceive the listener (Ostrov, Reis, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008; Talwar & Crossman, 2011). By the time children reach 8 years of age they possess more advanced lying capabilities, making their lies more difficult to detect; most of which are driven by the want to avoid punishment (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). For children who consider themselves to be in a controlling family environment, their progression into adolescence brings about a shift in their motivations for lying. Instead of lying to avoid punishment these adolescents feel the need to lie in attempts to preserve autonomy within the family (Jensen et al., 2004).

Involvement of Family Structure

Adolescents who develop the need to seek autonomy within their family have been shown to come from households with a nontraditional family structure. Conversely, those living in a traditional family household structure (biological mother and father) are less likely to seek autonomy (Nomaguchi, 2008; Roberts, Manolis, & Tanner Jr., 2006). Family structures that

create a need for children to seek autonomy seem to also motivate children's development of a favorable attitude toward deception. However, there has been no longitudinal evidence to support this. Cross-sectional studies involving academic performance and family structure in conjunction with those related to academic performance, bad behaviors, and lying draw indirect links to family structure as a predictor of lying (Potter, 2012; Shriner, Mullis, & Shriner, 2010; Sun & Li, 2011). A combined consideration of these studies revealed that a more traditional (two-parent, opposite sex) household fosters a higher achievement in academics compared to any other type of household (single-parent, same-sex parents, etc.). Children who enact a range of bad behaviors are more likely to perform badly in school and be more prone to lie (Akey, 2006; Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, & Ialongo, 2013; Steinel, Utz, & Koning, 2010; Talwar & Lee, 2008).

Gender Differences in Lying

During the adolescent to early adulthood years, researchers have observed the first discernible difference in lying behaviors of males and females. From 11-19 years of age boys were found to lie more than girls. During this time boys were also found to be more likely to commit other transgressions as well and exhibit more problem behavior (Jensen et al., 2004). As referenced previously, from DePaulo et al. (1996), adult men have been found to lie more than women, providing evidence for the fact that males are likely to engage in more lies beginning in childhood. This is a likely assumption because boys, who are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors, feel to need to cover up their bad behaviors through lying about them (DePaulo, Anesfield, Kirkendol, & Boden, 2004).

Importance of Acceptability

The acceptability of lying behaviors may play a key role in ones use of deceptive behaviors. Those found to have a higher acceptability of lying in general were shown to have an increased likelihood of lying and decreased likelihood of being honest (Oliveira & Levine, 2008). It would be logical to assume that as children move into adolescence and young adulthood and exhibit more lying behaviors, regardless of motive, that their tendency to be more accepting of lying behaviors would increase as well. As mentioned previously, many studies have already shown that more lies are exhibited with progression from adolescence into young adulthood, with much emphasis on motives for lying.

CHAPTER 3

HYPOTHESES

This study is an examination of lie acceptability across elementary through high school grade adolescents and early adults (approximate ages 8-18). Based on the aforementioned research, we pose six hypotheses. First, lie acceptability is expected to be (H1) lowest among elementary school students, higher among middle school students, and highest among high schoolers Second, (H2a) we predict that children who report more incidences of bad behavior will have more favorable attitudes toward lying. Based on previous studies regarding gender differences in lying and other antisocial behaviors, we are making two gender-related predictions. H2b predicts that boys will report engaging in more antisocial behaviors than girls. H2c predicts that boys will report more favorable attitudes toward lying than will girls. Next, as (H3a) children who live in traditional, two opposite-sex parent households will regard deception as less acceptable than will children living in any nontraditional family configuration. Finally, because children from nontraditional families tend to engage in more antisocial behavior, (H3b) predicts that children from traditional family configurations will report fewer bad behaviors than will children from nontraditional family configurations.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

Participants

Participants (*N*=278) were obtained from the population of students enrolled in grades 3-12 at an eastern United States laboratory school. Ages of participants ranged from 8-19 years. The sample was 53% female (sex based on 276 responses, 2 students did not identify sex); further details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Summary of Sex per Grade Level

Grade Level	Male	Female	Total
3rd	0	3	3
4th	7	8	15
5th	11	9	20
6th	11	12	23
7th	18	25	43
8th	18	22	40
9th	27	19	46
10th	17	31	48
11th	9	8	17
12th	12	9	21
Total	130	146	276

The participants were predominately (89.1%) from a traditional two-parent household consisting of biological mother and biological father. A more detailed description of the population's family environment is shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Summary of Family Environment per Grade Level

Grade Level	Biological Mother & Biological Father	Biological Mother/Father & Nonbiological Mother/Father	Biological Mother Only	Biological Father Only	Relative (Aunt, Uncle, Grandparent, Sibling, Cousin)	Other	Total
3rd	2	0	0	0	1	0	3
4th	10	1	0	0	0	2	13
5th	16	2	2	0	1	0	21
6th	21	2	0	0	0	0	23
7th	36	4	2	0	0	1	43
8th	33	4	2	0	1	0	40
9th	36	4	5	1	0	0	46
10th	35	8	5	0	0	1	49
11th	12	2	2	0	0	1	17
12th	14	4	1	1	1	0	21
Total	215	31	19	2	4	5	276

Procedures and Measures

The data were collected using a survey that students completed on paper in classrooms under teacher supervision. All data collection was IRB approved and parental consent along with child assent was obtained. Participation in this study was dependent on the acquisition of appropriate assent forms for all participants. Attempts were made to receive all assent documentation from all students enrolled in grades 3-12, but only participants completing these were included in this study. The survey participants completed primarily consisted of questions related to the lie acceptability scale and potential predictors of lie acceptability (age, sex, grade level, family environment, and bad behaviors).

Lie Acceptability

The lie acceptability scale used in this study was previously published by Oliveira and Levine (2008), which uses 11 Likert-type items with a seven-point response format scaled from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1). Items from the scale were scored such that higher values reflected a more favorable attitude of deception (lie acceptability). Of the 11 items on the scale, 4 of them were scored in reverse, as indicated in Table 3. The frequencies across the 11 items were averaged and the lie acceptability scale overall was found to be highly reliable (α=0.83).

Table 3.

Lie Acceptability Scale

ITEM	Scoring
Never tell anyone the real reason you do anything unless it is useful to do so.	Normal
Lying is immoral.	Reverse
It is okay to lie in order to achieve one's goals.	Normal
What people don't know can't hurt them.	Normal
The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear.	Normal
There is no excuse for lying to someone else.	Reverse
Honestly is always the best policy.	Reverse
It is often better to lie than to hurt someone's feelings.	Normal
Lying is just wrong.	Reverse
Lying is no big deal.	Normal
There is nothing wrong with bending the truth now and then.	Normal

Family Environment

Participants chose from the following six options: biological mother and biological father, biological mother or father and nonbiological mother or father, biological mother only,

biological father only, relative (aunt, uncle, grandparent(s), sibling, and cousin), or other. For some of the analyses, the family environment was recoded into two categories: traditional household (biological mother and biological father) and nontraditional household (all others) as shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Family Environment

ITEM	TYPE
Biological Mother & Biological Father	Traditional Household
Biological Mother or Father & Nonbiological Mother or Father Biological Mother only Biological Father only Relative (aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling, cousin) Other	Nontraditional Household

Bad Behaviors

Bad behaviors were measured based on participants' admission to committing one or more of a specified list of eight bad behaviors (Table 5) adapted from Mott, Fondell, Hu, Kowaleski-Jones, and Menaghan (1996). Participants were scored based on how many of the bad behaviors they admitted to committing, with scores ranging from 0 to 8, with higher scores indicating committing all bad behaviors listed and 0 indicating no bad behaviors listed were committed.

Table 5.

Indicators of Bad Behavior

ITEM
Had to bring parents to school because of bad behavior (once or more)
Hurt someone badly enough to need bandages/doctor (once or more)
Lied to parents about something important (twice or more)
Took something from store without paying (once or more)
Damaged school property on purpose (once or more)
Skipped a day of school without permission (twice or more)
Used force to obtain money or things
Tried to get something from someone by lying to them

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

Lie Acceptability in Relation to Age and Grade

We hypothesized that there would be a noticeable shift in acceptability of lying as students progress from elementary and middle school grades to high school grades (H1). To test this, multiple one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to determine lie acceptability across ages and grades. Lie acceptability was no different amongst ages tested (F (11, 266) = 1.14, p = .33) nor grade levels (F (9, 268) = 1.3, p = 0.25). Additionally, students were broken into three grade categories (Elementary School (grades 3-5; N = 39), Middle School (grades 6-8; N = 106), High School (grades 9-12; N = 133)) for the purpose of further analysis. These grade categories were created in efforts to increase the number of students in each group and because we hypothesized that elementary and middle school students would be less accepting of lying, without hypothesizing as to a specific grade level. Consistent with the by-grade analysis, analysis of lie acceptability scores by grade category indicated no differences in lie acceptability (F (2, 275) = 0.55, p = 0.58) (Elementary: M = 2.96, SD = 1.06; Middle: M = 3.07, SD = 1.10; High: M = 3.16, SD = 1.13) but did exhibit a consistent increase from lower to higher grade categories.

Role of Bad Behaviors

We hypothesized that 1) (H2a) acceptability of lying would be positively correlated with the presence of bad behaviors, 2) (H2b) males would exhibit more bad behaviors, and 3) (H3b) those coming from a nontraditional household would exhibit increased bad behaviors. Results from a Pearson correlation analysis revealed that participants who committed bad behaviors were more likely to be accepting of lies (r = 0.31; p = 0.00), independent of gender. Separation of

male and female participants showed a higher correlation between lie acceptability and bad behaviors in males ($r = 0.32$; $p = 0.00$) than females ($r = 0.25$; $p = 0.002$). One-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference in bad behaviors from those participants coming from traditional versus nontraditional households (F (1, 274) = 0.70, $p = 0.41$). Analysis of gender and bad behaviors discovered that males exhibited more bad behaviors than females (one-way ANOVA, F (1, 274) = 14.35, $p = 0.00$).

Gender Differences in Lie Acceptability

We hypothesized that males would have a higher lie acceptability score overall (H2c). To test this, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Results revealed that males had a higher mean lie acceptability score ($N = 130$, $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.20$) than females ($N = 146$, $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.00$), which was shown to be significant (F (1, 274) = 5.54, $p = 0.02$).

Lie Acceptability in Relation to Family Environment

We hypothesized that participants living in a traditional household, family environment as biological mother and biological father present, are less accepting of lies compared to nontraditional arrangements (H3a). To test this, we carried out multiple one-way ANOVAs on lie acceptability with family environment and gender as between-subject variables. Data shown in Table 6 summarize a portion of these results dependent and independent of gender.

Table 6.

Comparison of Lie Acceptability Scores and Family Environment

Family Environment	Gender	Mean Score	*SD*	*N*
Biological Mother & Biological Father	Male	3.23	1.20	107
	Female	2.90	1.03	108
	Total	3.06	1.13	215
Biological Mother or Father & Nonbiological Mother or Father	Male	3.81	1.38	11
	Female	3.11	0.72	18
	Total	3.46	1.05	29
Biological Mother Only	Male	3.20	1.15	8
	Female	3.19	0.78	11
	Total	3.20	0.92	19
Biological Father Only	Male	2.80	-	1
	Female	5.10	-	1
	Total	3.95	1.63	2
Relative (aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling, cousin)	Male	2.90	-	1
	Female	3.60	0.52	3
	Total	3.25	0.55	4

Lie acceptability in relation to family environment independent of gender approached significance with a *p*-value of 0.07 (F (8, 274) = 1.85), whereas examination of this factor dependent of gender was much farther away from significance (F (4, 274) = 1.18, p = 0.32). Data related to family environment independent of participant gender were recoded to two categories as illustrated in Table 2. One-way ANOVA of lie acceptability in traditional versus nontraditional family environment was not statistically significant (F (1, 274) = 0.09, p = 0.76).

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Lie Acceptability in Children and Adolescents

In this study we did not find any conclusive evidence that children's acceptability of lying becomes altered in any way as they progress from elementary to high school. We had expected to see a lower acceptability in elementary and middle school grades, with greater acceptability in high school students (H1). Our study did not find a discernible difference in lie acceptability when comparing data based on grade category (elementary, middle, high), but we did see a consistent increase in the acceptability of lying as the grade level increased. However, considering the characteristics of the population examined in this study, a larger and more heterogeneous sample with a broader demographic may yield different results.

An interesting result unrelated to age or grade was that found regarding gender and lie acceptability. The present study's findings, similar those found in related studies (DePaulo et al., 1996; Jensen et al., 2004), found males to be more accepting of lying than females. We had expected males to be the more accepting gender (H2c), but it was surprising to see this consistency throughout the entire population. Due to the small sample size and unequal distribution of male and female participants in each grade, we were unable to analyze lie acceptability related to gender at each grade category, but we expect future studies may be able to shed some light on this. Ideally, we would like to have been able to do a more longitudinal study to follow a larger population of elementary students through high school and reassess their acceptability of lying at each interval along the way. This type of study would help us to truly answer the following questions: Are males always more accepting of lying than females? Does this only apply in certain family environments? Does this opinion develop at a specific point

during childhood and adolescence? While cross-sectional studies are generally considered acceptable and may be more convenient, longitudinal studies would provide the benefit of being able to detect changes at a group and individual level as it relates to the characteristics of children's lying capabilities (Institute for Work and Health, 2009).

Impact of Family Environment

Our findings regarding the influence of the family environment on one's acceptability of lying were amongst the most intriguing in this study. Although we did not find statistically significant differences for a child's likelihood to consider lying acceptable based on the family environment, we did identify some interesting and unexpected findings. We expected to find those living in a nontraditional family environment to be more accepting of lying (H3a). We did not find the expected main effect for family environment. However, when we crossed family environment with child gender, we found an unexpected (albeit nonsignificant) interaction between sex and family environment. Specifically, female children living with either their biological father only or living with a nonparental relative were more accepting of lying than males in their same type of family. Though these effects were not statistically significant, they are noteworthy in that they contradict the widely reported argument that males are more accepting of lying than are females. Our data lead us to believe that something within the family dynamic may be a contributing factor. Females living in a family environment void of a maternal figure may have a more favorable attitude toward lying due to the same factors that were found in a study by DePaulo et al. (1996). This referenced study found that females were twice to eight times more likely of telling self-centered lies, as opposed to other-oriented lies, to the opposite sex than to other females. For these select females, it seems logical to assume that DePaulo et.

al.'s (1996) findings may apply here as well in that the lack of a maternal figure results in the emergence of more deceptive behavior and the acceptability thereof. Future studies would also benefit from looking at a lesser researched family environment, one with same-sex parents.

Bad Behaviors and Motives for Lying

Results regarding the effect of bad behaviors on lie acceptability were the most significant of the entire study. As predicted, participants who admitted to committing bad behaviors were the most accepting of lying (H2a). However, neither family environment nor gender appeared to play a role in this factor as we had anticipated, indicating that bad behaviors themselves are independent indicators of lie acceptability. Previous studies (Ostrov et al., 2008; Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007) have suggested that bad behaviors and lying in general go hand in hand, as the act of lying commences in efforts to cover up or hide bad behaviors committed. Our findings cannot tell which came first – the bad behaviors or the acceptance of lying – but at the least, they suggest that there is a significant correlation between the two factors.

As far as other factors measured (age, grade, family environment) that may be related to bad behaviors, no conclusions can be drawn due to the simple fact that based on our methods we have no knowledge of when the committed bad behaviors actually occurred, we only know that they committed them at some point in the past. Our study did find that males commit (or admitted to committing) more bad behaviors than females (H2b), with a higher correlation between males committing bad behaviors and being accepting of lying than females. Future studies, however, could examine this more precisely by pairing timing of transgressions more exactly with participants' opinion of lying at the time. Additionally, for those living in a

nontraditional household, it would be ideal to examine the views of participants before and after the change in family dynamics occurred, if there were any, as well as tracking any transgressions committed along the way.

Limitations

Though the current findings do provide some indication as to what variables are associated with a more favorable attitude toward lie acceptability in children, some limitations of the current investigation must be addressed. First, the present sample is one of convenience and therefore generalizations are to be made with caution. The numbers of students per grade participating in the study were not equal in addition to an overall small population size. Second, data used in this study were gathered via survey that was administered by classroom instructors. Therefore, it is possible there may be some dishonesty on the part of the participants because they feared their answers would be reviewed by their instructor, especially for those students who indicated that they had committed some bad behavior. In fact, several surveys showed indications that participants changed their response regarding bad behaviors committed. We suspect this may be to prevent possible repercussions from an authoritative figure. If this occurred, it may be better for the study investigator or unrelated party to administer the survey to the students. Third, self-reported measures regarding lie acceptability, as well as bad behaviors committed, may be influenced by social desirability bias, even though considerable portions of participants in the study readily admitted to being accepting of lying and committing several bad behaviors. Finally, this study did not take into consideration the overall mental health status (i.e. ADHD, autistic) of the participants, which may also have contributions to the behavior aspect of this study.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that gender, bad behaviors, and family environment have influences on the acceptability of lying as a social behavior in children and adolescents but in an independent manner. Results from this study provide potential indicators of the acceptability of lying in children and adolescents that may be identified early to prevent possible bad behavior later on as well as increasing awareness for those in particular family environments that may foster a prodeceptive attitude. Future research on this topic, primarily via expanding existing data in a longitudinal manner, would provide a more concise analysis of the factors that contribute to lie acceptability in children and adolescents.

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